Chapter 110
Perceived Best Practices for Faculty Training in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

Student learning style differences have been widely researched in both traditional face-to-face and online learning environments (Irani, Scherler & Harrington, 2003; Steinbronn, 2007; Williamson & Watson, 2007; Ugur, Akkoyunlu & Kurbanoglu, 2001). After conducting a literature review of adult student learning styles and teaching method analysis, it became apparent that there was not a significant difference in academic performance for students with differing learning styles whether they attended face-to-face or online classroom environments. What was not clearly indicated though, from the review of the literature, was what were the perceived best practices for online teaching from the perspective of experienced distance educators and whether the instructors' perceived learning style was incorporated in training programs to assist faculty to teach online. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative pilot study is to determine the perceived best practices to train faculty to teach in an online environment and how individual instructors' perceived learning style can be incorporated within best practices to foster competence on an individual instructor level. This study also analyzes faculty resistance to distance education and how transformative learning theory may play a role in overcoming this resistance.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Babson Survey Research Group, the number of students, as of fall 2011, taking at least one online course totaled 6.7 million. The proportion of all students taking at least one online course is at an all-time high of 32% as compared to the fall of 2002 which reported only 9.6%. With the ever increasing demand of adult students taking online course work, universities are attempting to keep up with demand by offering distance education programs to attract students and realize additional revenue opportunities (Grandzol & Grandzol, 2006). With the demand for distance education, online faculty must be sought after to teach these courses and the need for effective,

practical training programs becomes a necessity. With online education expanding in scope and popularity, instructor quality and experience in providing online education also plays a vital role in the success or failure of the educational experience for the student. What is interesting, however, is that while the demand for online coursework is high, faculty surveyed from the Babson Survey Research Group reported only 30.2% accepted the value and legitimacy of an online education. This is only slightly more than the 2002 result of 27.6%. While demand from students is high for online education, faculty's perception of online education as a legitimate educational practice increased marginally over the past decade. While some research has been conducted on best practices for training faculty to teach online (Wolf, 2006), it did not address thoroughly factors to address overcoming resistance to faculty's perceptions of online learning in order to implement best practices. Additionally, tailoring the best practices to accommodate individual instructor learning styles for online pedagogical approaches was not addressed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework I am utilizing for this research topic is transformative learning theory. In order implement perceived best practices to train faculty to teach in an online environment, instructors who are resistant to teach online for various reasons and then subsequently have a change of heart may have engaged in critical self-reflection. The research question raised is: Do faculty, who initially resisted online teaching, experience changes in their assumptions and beliefs if they have engaged in critical self-reflection prior to beginning to teach online? If so, does transformative learning play a role in explaining the change? Transformative learning theory is defined as "learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised

interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action"(Taylor, 2008, p. 5).In order to contemplate a revised meaning of an experience to guide future action an individual must engage in critical self-reflection. Critical self-reflection is a self-examination of internalized assumptions. A person must reflect critically on his or her own closely held assumptions and beliefs in order to have a transformative learning experience (Cranton, 2006). After an individual engages in critical self-reflection and is willing and open to alternative viewpoints, a perspective transformation may occur and revised meaning perspectives may develop. Mezirow (1994) further outlined this process of learning as shaped by frames of reference (meaning perspectives) which are the collective assumptions through which we interpret the world that include habits of mind and point of view. Habits of mind are a set of assumptions that act as a filter to interpret meaning of an experience. Points of view are clusters of meaning schemes which are manifestations of meaning perspectives. Our meaning perspectives are transformed through reflection when confronted with a disorienting dilemma which serves as a trigger for reflection (p. 223). For faculty who are resistant to distance education, they must be willing to critically self- reflect on why they are resistant to distance education to be in a position to entertain teaching online. But, what factors would contribute to a change in habit of mind or result in a revised meaning perspective to entertain teaching online if faculty were initially resistant? The institution, for example, may mandatorily require their entire staff to learn to teach online, which would not lend itself to a transformative learning experience. Under transformative learning theory, a disorienting dilemma can lead to perspective transformation. A disorienting dilemma can be a major event that changed a person's perspective, such as a "death of a significant other, job loss, a natural disaster" (Taylor, 2008, p. 6.), for example. A threat of a job loss would definitely alter a person's viewpoint in order to overcome initial

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